

## **S1 — Episode 8 — Queer Visual Storytelling**

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Tara talks to LGBTQ Families Speak Out team member benjamin lee hicks about the illustrations they composed for the project's verbatim theatre piece *Out at School*.

Tara: Hello and welcome to Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're broadcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Last month Kate re-joined us to talk about the song she wrote for verbatim theatre piece *Out at School*. Today on Gender Sexuality School, LGBTQ Families Speak out team member, benjamin lee hicks, is here to talk about the visual images they composed for the play. *Out at School* is a scripted of verbatim monologues that the research team has created from video interviews we collected in the LGBTQ Families Speak out study. The term verbatim refers to the origins of the word spoken in the monologues. In a verbatim monologue, the words of people who are interviewed are transcribed, edited, arranged, and recontextualized so they can be performed on stage by actors. *Out at School* is a work in progress. It currently consists of a script that contains 11 verbatim monologues based on interviews with different families, a set of visual images that accompany each monologue drawn by benjamin, and two songs, *Pushing the Envelope* and *Let Love Be the Way*, both composed by Kate Reid. benjamin, welcome to Gender Sexuality School.

benjamin: Thank you.

Tara: So, to begin our interview benjamin, can you tell us about your process of creating the visual images for each of the monologues in the *Out at School* playscript?

benjamin: Sure. So, I think that in this work in a way that is different, perhaps than some of the other ways that I make and use art and images in other parts of my life, or even in other parts of my academic work, the process really begins with a lot of thought about theory and method. And sort of not just how I will technically create it, but why I'm creating it, right. Yeah, and so eventually, I kind of, it, kind of, I think about it, so that it can sit in conversations with other aspects of our arts-based research and other mediums that members of our team use. And I think about how all of those will come together and, and also how they'll continue to shift and change as we experience their use with an audience and over time. So, I thought a lot about the development of the images and, sort of like how that sits in relation to the idea of verbatim and how we use that term in our written and performative work. So maybe I'll start with that part of my cognitive process. Sure, other than technical things. So, the illustrations that I make in response to the stories shared in the monologues are, aren't and can't really be a visual equivalent for verbatim representation. Kind of the nature of non-photographic imagery disallows that possibility for any kind of visual verbatim, even, even if it was my inclination to

try and sort of make that happen. Instead, I think the visual images, I think of them kind of as a combination of both process and product. They're a blend of my own interpretation, and positionality in relation to the story being told. And they're also kind of an illustrative account of that character's tellings more directly. So, for example, my own experience as a gender queer trans person, as an educator, are necessarily part of how I make sense of their stories. And that becomes visible when I draw. I guess something to mention is that like that kind of blatant and tangible visibility is not very conventional in academic work, but it is very queer. Right, that's how I think about it. It's, it's, and part of that for me, it's defiantly emotional.

Tara: Right. So, there's emotion visible in lots of your images.

benjamin: Yeah, I mean, I hope it's visible. I assume it's visible. It's, it's present in the process. Right. So yeah, I guess I act on faith as an artist in that like, if I, if I am putting something into it, then that is being picked up in some way, at least by some people, right? So I'm conscious of that kind of energy going in. And so it continues to be my hope that adding the visual images to the verbal stories that we tell through the monologues can in some way in that energy, like invite the audience to consider not just what they think but also why they think that why they feel those things? And maybe even question aspects of their own positionality that— that are co-creating or helping to maintain those beliefs.

Tara: Right. Right. Right. Wonderful. So, you've been working as a research assistant on the LGBTQ Families team. And we've been doing some conventional thematic analysis, we've done some arts-based analysis by putting together monologues from the actual interviews, but how is the process of creating images? How does that affect your understanding of what the families were telling the team?

benjamin: First of all, just I guess, one of the things I always like to say is like, I have one of the best research jobs in the world, probably, I mean, perfectly suited for my needs anyways, but in that I get to like, draw pictures to code things in certain ways. Like I get to respond to data through drawing, which is one of my favorite things. So, but in terms of your question, I think it's actually a very multi-layered question. Okay. Yeah, I think like, I can only really enter through, through a lens of like the idea of reciprocal acknowledgement, meaning like, as a visual artist, using art and research, I need always to acknowledge that my, you know, like I was saying, like, my own emotions, and stories, and experiences are always affecting how I understand the stories that I see and hear. And, and the retelling that I'm doing. That I'm really, I'm really feeling it on a visceral level, and that and so like, whatever I put out becomes a mix of how I understand their stories. And then, like, there's an aesthetic that comes from my own experiences. So, the way that I draw has, has been taught to me through everything that I've

experienced-- that, that's what comes out on paper. That's what makes what the way one person draws different from somebody the way somebody else draws. So that's always there. Right? And I don't think this actually, I don't think that phenomenon is very different than any other way. We, as humans kind of take each other in and relate back to each other. We're always like responding to somebody partially through our own filter. Right, right. But I think it's definitely more immediate and obvious in a visual context. Or maybe I just, like, I've just come to be used to acknowledging more. So, something – do you want some examples from the images? I was thinking particularly about two of them. One of them I end up talking about a lot because it was one of the first ones that I – that I really connected with as a member of the team. So, there's a piece, a monologue called "outing my kids" where Carlene describes a piece of her story. And she talks about how she felt badly when sort of the affective response of other students and parents on the schoolyard to what they perceived as her in air quotes, "boy-girl gender expression", pre-empted her children's ability to decide for themselves whether or not they would talk about their LGBTQ family while at school. And for me, there was there was an emotional truth in the set of assumptions that were described there, that I connected to very deeply from my own experience as a, as a, I guess, again, an air quotes "visibly gender queer elementary school teacher", right, people generally read me as genderqueer, which is accurate. But it's, you know, it's based on a social expectation, right. And so, it's not something that I think that I can describe very well in words, even if I felt inclined to do so. But so the opportunity to contribute visual emotive layers to a verbal story about that has been a privilege that I've, that I'm thankful for as both an artist and a queer person, because it's allowed me to reflect on the fact that I mean, it can be extremely painful to maintain awareness of the ways that other people focus on who they think you are, especially in that context, when all you really want to do is sort of like be connecting with children. And so, I wanted in that image to focus on, I wanted to show somehow, like meaningful relationship building between adults and kids. And so, to me, that image shows that like the love and the care in the adult-child relationship is like a conversation about identity and freedom and moving in and out of boxes. And in that, in the bubble, the sort of like, what would traditionally be speech bubbles in that image are filled with these kinds of explosive images, and so there's a sort of a nod to the idea that like, we speak through emotion, regardless of who we are, you know, I guess, very generally the idea that love is love, right? And that's not something that that needs always to be described. And when people can connect to an image that they recognize, I think that that can do some of the same work or deeper work. Yeah. Have a little bit of a different example, or a different one? Yeah. Because they're all like, they've all developed in slightly different ways. This, this second example is, is, is quite a different process again, okay. So, this one, so I can refer to the image that I created for scene four and out of school, which is, they wrapped her in the flag, right. And I think that this one, I wanted to talk about this one, because I think it's perhaps the closest to direct representation or like, the closest to the idea of verbatim I guess,

that I created. In the like, sort of, in order to draw the main figure, I asked the student's who's Violet's mom, May, to send me a photo of Violet so I could refer to that directly in order to sort of better capture her spirit and essence on the day at Queen's Park. Yes, the flag raising that they were talking about in the monologue. And, and this component felt particularly important to me because their story is so much about Violet showing up and being physically present and counted and proud and seen for the self that she knows herself to be kind of for the first while really for the first time in a very public setting. So, before I went ahead and used this image that I drew, and before we used it in any public performances or publications, I asked Violet to approve the drawing, she was seven at the time. And just as we would with text, monologues, right, regardless of the person's age. And in this case, in particular, I really wanted there to be as much of Violet's experience and personality coming through in a very direct way as possible. So, I wanted to try and mitigate. Although you can't eliminate it, I want to try and mitigate some of what I'm projecting onto that situation.

Tara: Fantastic. As you think about the, the project, coming to a performance at Pride this coming summer in 2019, we're going to ask you to perhaps do some new images, because I think we want to add a few monologues and make sure that we have a wide variety of experiences performed. Do you imagine doing the same kinds of things? Or do you imagine your process going to be a little bit different?

benjamin: That's a good question. Yeah, I'm excited. And I'm looking forward to doing some new images for the for the new monologues and also for Kate's songs. Yes, because we have one more song for Kate. Yeah, yeah. And I haven't done one for the first one yet. Really? That's right. Yeah. We've just been kind of using some, some standing pieces over the time being. So, I'm excited about that. But in terms of, well, I guess for those as well. I mean, all of the new monologues and Kate's songs have developed while I've been on the team. That's right. Yeah. So I think, you know, although I was I was quite familiar with the monologues and especially some of the people like actually, it's interesting that you just did talk about Carline's and the Adley families, I knew those people the best probably, when I was creating work, so maybe it's a bit more personal but I feel like this one, these ones, I don't know I'll probably have more specific things to say about it once I've done it, yeah, I don't always know what's gonna happen for me visually. But I can only imagine that that there's another layer in there of, um, it's not just me bringing my life experience to something that I've encountered or someone that I've met once or twice, it's you know, those things plus another dimensionality of our experience, like our physical experience together and another one of all the times that we've used it in our teaching together and those responses to it so it'll be interesting to see what comes out I think it'll be similar process in the way that I do all of my work, which is just like, I act a lot on trusting my gut, right when it comes to like what feels authentic, valid, I guess, valid to me in what I'm

creating, but other than that, I think I think there's, there, there will be, there will be a different process and I can't really say what it is right now. So, we should do part two.

Tara: Well part two after our Pride performance.

benjamin: We should have a follow up for everyone, little debrief sessions after something. I think that'd be great.

Tara: I think that'd be great. benjamin, thanks so much for joining us. I really loved hearing about you speak the ways that you created visuals for our play Out at School and I'm looking forward to our next conversation.

benjamin: Thank you. Thanks for having me. It's great.

Tara: benjamin lee hicks is a visual artist, elementary school teacher and PhD candidate in Curriculum Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. They taught JK to grade six classrooms in the Toronto District School Board for eight years prior to beginning Graduate Studies full time. benjamin has written and designed curriculum materials on topics of sustainable community building, queering school space and arts-based activism. They are interested in how we might better support teachers to expect queerness and welcome all gender identities in their classrooms. benjamin is also passionate about centering the voices and experiences of trans and non-binary people navigating the school system as students, staff, and caregivers. Alright, that's our podcast for today. If you have any burning questions about gender, sexuality, and school, send an email to [info@LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca](mailto:info@LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca) with the subject line, Ask Gender Sexuality School. In future podcasts, I'll take listeners' questions about issues of gender and sexuality at school and try to answer them with the help of some amazing folks who have been thinking about gender and sexuality for a while. You can find this podcast at [WWW.LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca](http://WWW.LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca). This episode was produced with the support of the New College Initiative Fund and from Doug Friesen who is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Thanks to LGBTQ Families Speakout team member Kate Reid, sound engineer Lisa Patterson and musician Doug Friesen for creating the music that opens and closes the show. I'm Tara Goldstein. All the best.